

Introduction

Getting nutrition right in the early years can have a positive impact on long-term development.

Feeding Young Imaginations

Every child deserves a healthy start in life.

Getting the balance right in a young child's diet can have a positive impact on his/her long-term health and development. For parents and those working with very young children, there is a wide range of information available on what constitutes a balanced diet.

If you are a parent or carer or are involved in running an early years setting, this guide will provide you with top tips for helping your children to eat well and be healthy. It is part of the Pre-school Learning Alliance's initiative, Feeding Young Imaginations, designed to provide you with nutritional guidance and practical ideas to make healthy eating fun for children.

We are working in partnership with the British Nutrition Foundation to make sure our information is up-to-date and reflects the latest advice. Together, we will develop resources specifically tailored to those caring for and working with children under five.

Good food and nutrition

Early food experiences have an important impact on eating patterns in adult life.

When planning for the food provision of children under five there are some special considerations to take into account, both from a physiological perspective and with respect to establishing good eating habits for life. Some of the healthy eating principles that apply to adults do not apply to young children. The important factors to consider are:

- Pre-school children have a high energy and nutrient requirement relative to their size.
- They have a small stomach and a relatively under-developed gut which prevents them from consuming large quantities of food at a time and sometimes causes harmless bowel problems.
- They have a variable appetite, related to fluctuations in growth rate and level of physical activity.

While healthy eating guidelines designed for adults and older children are not wholly appropriate for pre-school children, especially for those under two, they can be used to shape the diet from an early age so there is a gradual progression towards healthy eating as the child gets older. Although there are a couple of specific points relating to very young children under two years which will be discussed later in this guide, such as the consumption of milk, there are not distinct sets of guidelines for children under two and over two.

Instead eating habits and food intake should fit in with the whole family, whilst bearing in mind the special nutritional needs of this age group.

Why good food and nutrition is important

Promoting healthy eating in an early years setting provides an assurance to parents or carers that their child's nutritional wellbeing is being taken care of. It helps children settle into a new environment as good eating habits are established and is associated with improved learning and behaviour.

Children between the age of one and five years grow and develop rapidly and eating habits and food intake can affect this. For instance, a frequent poor energy intake can stunt growth. A poor iron intake can lead to the development of iron-deficiency anaemia which in turn is associated with frequent infections, poor weight gain, developmental delay and behaviour disorders. At this age, children are almost totally dependent on others for their food. Parents and carers should recognise that their own eating habits, including likes and dislikes, will be the ones that the child imitates.

Early food experiences have an important impact on eating patterns in adult life. Attitudes to eating, including which types of foods are considered 'normal' and whether mealtimes are regarded as social occasions or just something to be eaten while watching television, will develop during the early years.

Food and eating can be wonderful sources of learning for children, such as cooking, shopping, helping to lay the table and eating out. However, food can also be a source of frustration and a cause of arguments between the food provider and the child. Building on positive experiences with food will help to reduce such confrontation.

Checklist for mid-morning and mid-afternoon snacks

Use this checklist to help you keep a balance when providing the snacks. Remember snacks should complement meals so think about what was offered at breakfast and lunch.

Which food groups does the snack come from today? (please tick)

| |  Fruit and vegetables |  Bread, rice, potatoes, pasta |  Milk and dairy foods |  Meat, fish, eggs, beans |
|------------------|---|---|--|--|
| Monday | e.g. banana | | | |
| Tuesday | | | | e.g. hummus with carrot sticks |
| Wednesday | | e.g. plain or cheese scone | | |
| Thursday | | | e.g. fromage frais | |
| Friday | e.g. cucumber | | | |